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Fishermen arriving back at the beach at the end of the day in Santa Marta, Colombia.

Family of Fisherman Killed in U.S. Military Strike Says It Wants Justice

Colombia was a top U.S. ally in Latin America until the Trump administration began deadly strikes in international waters. Now, one family wants justice.

Fishermen arriving back at the beach at the end of the day in Santa Marta, Colombia.Credit...

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Reporting from Santa Marta, Colombia

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One day in mid-September, Alejandro Carranza, a Colombian fisherman who, his family said, had long plied the Caribbean in search of marlin and tuna, called his teenage daughter. He told her he was going fishing, she said, and would return in a few days.

He never made it back.

The day after he left, on Sept. 15, his family, fellow fishermen and Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, say Mr. Carranza was killed in a U.S. military [strike](#) on his boat. The furor about what happened to him has ignited a feud over the huge U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean and the legality of the deadly attacks on 20 vessels since September. A map locating Santa Marta, Colombia.



TRINIDAD
AND TOBAGO

Santa Marta

Caribbean Sea

PANAMA
VENEZUELA
Bogotá

*Pacific
Ocean*

COLOMBIA
BRAZIL
ECUADOR
PERU

250 MILES

The New York Times

"I never thought I would lose my father in this way," said Cheila Carranza, 14, this week, holding back tears as she gazed at a photo of him on her phone in her grandmother's crowded home, where she lives in one room with her mother and two siblings.

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As the death toll climbs from U.S. strikes on boats in waters near Latin America, tensions are increasing with Colombia, which had long been a top U.S. ally in the region. So far, [20 U.S. strikes](#) have killed at least 80 people.



Cheila Carranza, 14, in her grandmother's home, where she lives in one room with her mother and two siblings.

The attacks have enraged Mr. Petro, who accused the United States of murdering Mr. Carranza in one attack. President Trump responded by imposing sanctions on Mr. Petro and his family and moving to slash aid to the country. This week, Colombia suspended intelligence sharing with the United States until the Trump administration stops its strikes.

The Trump administration claims the attacks occurred on boats carrying illicit drugs that kill thousands of Americans. But many legal experts in the United States and elsewhere say the strikes violate international law because those killed, even if they had been suspected of committing any crimes, did not present an immediate threat.

Mangled bodies have begun [washing up](#) on the beaches of Trinidad and Tobago after U.S. strikes in the region. The only two known [survivors](#) of the strikes are not from Venezuela, but Colombia and Ecuador.

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The Trump administration has called Venezuela's president, Nicolás Maduro, the leader of a drug cartel and has privately said that the goal of

the U.S. deployment, the largest in decades in Latin America, is to push the authoritarian leader from power.

The Trump administration has not provided evidence, aside from descriptions of intelligence assessments and declassified portions of video images, that any of the vessels it has destroyed were carrying drugs. At the same time, in Mr. Carranza's case, there is no immediate ability to determine with certainty if he was simply a fisherman or had been involved in drug smuggling.

Mr. Petro, in a news conference last month, said Mr. Carranza was from a traditional fishing family, but "may have been involved very intermittently" with drugs.

Many fishermen in coastal and island communities, he said, become involved in drug transport because poverty leaves them few alternatives.

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The strikes have left Mr. Carranza's family reeling and grasping for answers, offering a rare glimpse into the strain the U.S. deployment can inflict on those left behind as the toll from the deadly attacks continues to climb. The family has hired an American lawyer, who said he was preparing a legal claim.

Video

Fishing boats in Santa Marta, where fishermen say the U.S. air strikes have made them fearful of venturing out into the waters to do their work. CreditCredit...

Katerine Hernández, the mother of three of Mr. Carranza's children, disputed Mr. Trump's [claim](#) that the strike that killed her former partner, along with two other people on the same boat, had targeted "confirmed narcoterrorists from Venezuela."

"Alejandro had nothing to do with Venezuela; he spent his entire life here in Colombia," said Ms. Hernández, 37, in an interview in Santa Marta, a sun-drenched city on Colombia's northern coast where she met Mr. Carranza when she was 13.

Mr. Carranza, 42, also occasionally took jobs piloting boats for others in the waters around Santa Marta, his family and other fishermen said, raising the possibility that the boat he was in was transporting something illicit with or without his knowledge.

But Ms. Hernández said that Mr. Carranza had never been involved in smuggling drugs. "If he was some kind of narcoterrorist," she said, "then why are we living in misery instead of a mansion?"

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Despite separating several years ago, Ms. Hernández said, she and Mr. Carranza remained close. Until recently, she and the children had lived with his parents. While he rarely earned more than Colombia's monthly minimum wage, about \$382, she said, he always put food on the table for her and the children.

Now, Ms. Hernández said, they were subsisting on the kindness of relatives who themselves have next to nothing. She and the three children are living in her mother's home in Gaira, a gritty area of Santa Marta not far from the city's glistening beaches.

Image



Katerine Hernández, the mother of three of Mr. Carranza's children, left, with her family at the house where she is currently living with her three children.

Dan Kovalik, an American lawyer hired by Mr. Carranza's family, said that even if Mr. Carranza had been suspected of piloting a boat carrying illicit drugs, it would have been illegal to kill him.

"If the people on the boat were suspected of drug trafficking, they should have been arrested, not killed," said Mr. Kovalik, who plans on filing suit in the United States and seeking damages for Mr. Carranza's family.

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The identities of the other two men aboard the boat remain unknown.

“This case is important from two points of view,” Mr. Kovalik added. “First, the family deserves compensation for the loss.”

“Second, we want this case to help stop these killings from taking place again,” Mr. Kovalik said. “This is murder, and it is destroying rule of law.”

Asked to respond to the assertions by Mr. Kovalik and Mr. Carranza’s family, the White House doubled down on its claims that the people killed in the Sept. 15 attack were “narcoterrorists.”

Since Mr. Carranza departed on the fishing trip two months ago, Ms. Hernández said, their lives have been shattered.

Before the U.S. strike, she said, she had already been unable to work after a motorcycle accident severely damaged her right leg — near the place on her ankle where she still has Mr. Carranza’s first name, tattooed.

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The school fees for Zaira, their 17-year-old daughter, have gone unpaid, she said, while their son, Libiston, 11, was traumatized after another child showed him the video shared by Mr. Trump, apparently showing the father’s boat being blown to pieces.

Ms. Hernández said that some people had questioned whether Mr. Carranza had even been killed at all since his body has not been recovered. Others have tried to insinuate that he was involved in drug smuggling, she said, because of a previous brush with the law.

Image



Leonardo Vega, the leader of a fisherman's association in Santa Marta.

In a case from 2012, Mr. Carranza had taken part in a scheme to steal weapons that had been confiscated in legal proceedings, according to Colombian officials. Ms. Hernández and Adenis Manjarres, 30, Mr. Carranza's first cousin, both said that Mr. Carranza had never been jailed in connection to the case. Colombian officials did not have more information on the disposition of the case.

Leonardo Vega, 40, a longtime friend of Mr. Carranza's who is the leader of a fisherman's association in Santa Marta, said he was certain that Mr. Carranza was killed in the Sept. 15 strike.

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Upon seeing the attack on social media, Mr. Vega said that the type of boat in the video was precisely the kind used by fishermen from Santa Marta, in contrast to differently designed boats departing from Venezuela.

"I immediately thought, 'He's one of ours,'" said Mr. Vega. He added that the destroyed boat had two motors instead of the three or four used on boats typically used to smuggle drugs or other contraband.

Fishermen can be gone for a week or so, often sleeping in hammocks on deserted beaches, he said.

“But two months gone, no way,” Mr. Vega added. Looking at factors like the dates of Mr. Carranza’s departure and that of the U.S. attack, along with the boat seen in the video, he said he could come to only one conclusion: “Sadly, my friend is dead.”

Mr. Vega said Mr. Carranza had been well known for his easygoing personality among other fishermen in Santa Marta. He was known by the nickname “Coroncoro,” which refers to a small fish typically found in the area, and enjoyed drinking beer and playing pool.

Image



Fishermen’s catch in Santa Marta.

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Beyond what Mr. Carranza’s family is grappling with, the U.S. strikes have struck fear among Santa Marta’s fishermen, Mr. Vega said, and made them reluctant to do their work.

It is now tuna season, he said, usually one of the most lucrative times for fishermen to head out. But fear of what might await them there has virtually ground fishing to a standstill, he added.

Genevieve Glatky and Simón Posada contributed reporting from Bogotá, Colombia.

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